

Australia To Impose 'Draconian' Anti-Terror Laws

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CANBERRA (Reuters) - Australia is to impose "draconian" counter-terrorism laws after state and territory leaders agreed on Tuesday to wide-ranging security proposals made by Prime Minister John Howard in the wake of the London bombings.

Howard said the new laws, which include detaining suspects for up to 48 hours without charge and using electronic tracking devices to keep tabs on terror suspects, were needed to combat "unusual circumstances".

"We do live in very dangerous and different and threatening circumstances, and a strong and comprehensive response is needed. I think all of these powers are needed," Howard told a news conference after the leaders' terrorism summit in Canberra.

"I cannot guarantee that Australia will not be the subject of a terror attack ... but as a result of the decisions taken today we are in a stronger and better position to give peace of mind to the Australian community," he said.

Howard also unveiled plans to spend A\$20 million (8.5 million pounds) on an Australian Federal Police chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear research facility.

The new laws come from a review of Australia's counter-terror laws following the July 7 London bus and subway bombings.

Australia, a staunch U.S. ally with troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, has steadily beefed up security and anti-terrorism laws since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

Australia has never suffered a major peacetime attack on home soil, but 88 Australians were among 202 people killed in the 2002 Bali bombings and 10 Indonesians were killed when the Australian embassy in Jakarta was hit by a suicide bomb on September 9, 2004.

Under the planned changes, existing sedition laws are to be replaced by a new law making it a crime to incite violence against the community or against Australian soldiers serving overseas or to support Australia's enemies.

"In many sense the laws that we have agreed to today are draconian laws, but they are necessary laws to protect Australians," Queensland state premier Peter Beattie told a news conference.

Howard agreed to a demand by the states and territories for a review of the new laws, which have been condemned by civil rights activists, after five years and a sunset clause meaning that they would have to be reauthorised after 10 years.

Australia's six states and two territories are all governed by leaders from the centre-left Labour party, which is in opposition to Howard's conservative Liberal/National

coalition at a federal level.

The leaders agreed to strengthen citizenship laws to make immigrants to Australia wait three years instead of two before they would qualify to become Australian citizens.

Police would also be given wider powers to stop and search people, and it would become a crime to leave any baggage unattended at an airport.

New Terror Laws 'Fascist'

From AAP 9-27-5

A PROMINENT Islamic community figure has denounced Australia's new counter-terrorism laws, saying sunset clauses could mean the nation becoming "a fascist state" until 2016.

His comment followed the agreement announced today by Prime Minister John Howard and state and territory leaders to implement a range of new security laws, with a sunset clause promising they will be reviewed after five years and expire in 10 years.

Law enforcement agencies will be able to detain terror suspects for up to 14 days without charge, use tracking devices to monitor their movements, and seek penalties for people who "incite" terrorism.

Keysar Trad, of the Islamic Friendship Association of Australia, said the new laws were a severe erosion of individual freedoms and would create fear and division in society.

"The sunset clauses mean the laws will remain in effect for 10 years, and the review is more likely to increase

them rather than moderate them," he said.

"These laws will be unfair and could lead to the creation of a fascist state."

Mr Trad said Australians should be worried at the possibility they could be detained for questioning for up to 14 days, on the basis of nothing more than "intelligence".

"It's very frightening to think of the future," he said.

"People can be arbitrarily taken in (and detained)".

He said the counter-terrorism measures were also aimed at silencing criticism of the Howard Government's policies.

"It's very scary, especially with these laws about incitement to terror," Mr Trad said.

"They could be applied to people who call for the withdrawal of troops (from Iraq). It's a form of silencing debate."

"People like me ... who have seen these measures in other countries have seen how they have destroyed those societies.

"We'll be stuck with them until possibly 2016.

"I can't see how any of these laws are likely to lead to the elimination of the threat of terrorism.

"They will be dividing society and we don't need to divide Australia - we're already suffering from this atmosphere of suspicion and apprehension."

<http://www.news.com.au/story/0,10117,16738500-29277,00.html>

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